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Civil War Episodes

Fort Delaware

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

In Other Days

By

J. HAMPTON MOORE

WHEN it was built about the middle of the last century, Fort Delaware near the head of Delaware Bay was one of the largest forts in the United States. It was intended primarily for the protection of Philadelphia. Today it stands on its island in the lower Delaware above Reedy Point, a drab relic of the past, safeguarded only by a handful of caretakers. It is no longer regarded as serviceable for defense purposes. But the old fort has a history, and tourists on Delaware River boats are wont to discuss it. Especially is it famous as a prison for Confederate soldiers, who occupied it from 1861 to 1865.

Rat Story Denied

Escorting members of the Rivers and Harbors Committee of Congress on a deeper Delaware channel expedition, June, 1911, we passed the fort, which greatly interested the Southern members of the Committee. Amongst them was Senator Ransdell, of Louisi-

ana, who recalled that his brother, a Confederate soldier, had been confined there. Other members of the committee talked of the fort very much as Union soldiers had previously complained of Southern prisons such as Andersonville, Georgia; Florence, South Carolina, and Salisbury, North Carolina. Union soldiers found fault with the food served at these Southern prisons, and several of the Congressmen coming from nearby localities let loose on Fort Delaware. One of them declared that a relative of his had complained that rat meat had been served at Fort Delaware. The discussion was good-natured enough, but I remembered it on another occasion when passing the fort on an inspection boat with General Felix Agnus, publisher of the Baltimore American. The General, I learned, had been in command at Fort Delaware during the war period, and took pride in the treatment accorded the Confederate prisoners. He denied the rat story emphatically. Suggesting to the General the importance of a statement from him which might some day be given to the world, he wrote me later in detail.

After Lincoln's Death

"I had been campaigning in the Shenandoah Valley," he said, "and had aided the successful fortune of our commander, General Phil Sheridan. We were looking forward to the end of the war, which had lasted beyond all expectations, and we could not know the complications that might arise from this new situation (the assassination of Lincoln). Troops were ordered from the field for the purpose of protecting the different prison camps east and west. I had been in the valley many months facing the Confederate general, Jubal Early, when I received orders to proceed with my command, the 165th New York, to Fort Delaware, built on an island opposite Delaware City, there to report to General Schoepf, the commander, who had with him, if I remember correctly, the 3d Maryland, and part of the Pennsylvania artillery troops. As it was near the end of the war these detachments were greatly decimated, and I doubt if the whole muster was more than 1200 to 1500; with my command this was raised to 2100 or 2200 fighting men, ample to protect the 10,000

to 12,000 prisoners.

"The fort proper was always cleared for action. We had our main quarters for our own troops in the fort proper, with ample barracks for the prisoners, generally double-decked, built on the outside, with high board fences with elevated guard-posts. To the best of my recollection, I do not believe we ever lost a prisoner through escape; our vigilance was well planned and any attempt at escape would have been fatal. Prisoners were kept under strict surveillance and discipline. In the early hours squads were detailed to police and clean up quarters, bunks were constantly inspected and our medical forces took every possible precaution to guard against vermin and diseases. Hospitals were built outside the confines, and humane treatment was the portion of every prisoner in our care.

Had Own Cooks

"We had daily communication with Philadelphia and our quartermaster's boat made daily trips to that genial city and brought down provisions that were served to our garrison and to the prisoners. The latter had cooks detailed from their own ranks with ample aid in the preparation of the food for the prisoners, and whenever it came my turn to inspect I partook of the same food. As is well known, many of the prisoners had friends in the Northern lines who kept them supplied with extra dainties from private homes; many of the boxes revealed goodies prepared by gentle hands—goodies which our own men envied perhaps, but could not touch."

General Agnus was well known throughout the South as a friendly Unionist as well as an editor. He was chairman of the original Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Commission authorized to report upon the taking over of the old, privately operated toll canal by the Federal Government. He was also known to many Philadelphians as the father-in-law of Oscar Leser, associate of the late William H. Staake, who after his marriage to the General's daughter, took up the practice of law in Baltimore, became a Judge, and who still figures largely in the affairs of the city on the Patapsco.

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